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THE NATURE AND TENDENCY OF THE ECCLESIASTIC CONSTITUTION IN SCOTLAND.

A SERMON.

Preached before the Synod of Perth and Stirling, April 16. 1760.

By JOHN BONAR, A. M.
One of the Miniſters of Perth.

K Rev. of Perth
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N. B. It has been the practice of the ſynod of Perth and Stirling, ſince the year 1746, to have a ſermon preached before them the ſecond day of their meeting, on the principles of the reformation and the revolution.—— It was on this occaſion that the following ſermon was preached by their appointment.

TO

His GRACE

CHARLES LORD CATHCART,

His Majesty's High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 1760,

This DISCOURSE,

On the Constitution of that Church,

Is humbly dedicated

BY

JOHN BONAR.

A

SERMON.

PSAL. cxxii. 9.

Becauſe of the houſe of the Lord our God, I will ſeek thy good.

ALTHOUGH we are not told at what particular time this beautiful and animated ſong was compoſed, yet ſeveral circumſtances render it highly probable, that it is one of thoſe ſacred hymns which were ſung at the three grand feſtivals, when all the males among the Jews were obliged to preſent themſelves before the Lord at Jeruſalem. And whoever duly attends to the nature of the pſalm, will find it well ſuited to ſuch an occaſion. David therein ſets before his countrymen the peculiar happineſs of their ſituation, both with reſpect to their form of civil government, in the 5th verſe ſtyl'd, *the ſeats of judgment, and the thrones of the houſe of David*; and on account of thoſe religious privileges by which their

country was diſtinguiſhed, and which rendered the preſervation of their government the perpetual ſubject of the fervent prayers and warmeſt zeal of every good man, and every true Iſraelite.

My text, in this view, ſeems abundantly applicable to the deſign of our preſent meeting; which is, to excite a proper attention and regard to thoſe privileges, civil and ſacred, which, in Britain, we have enjoyed ſince the *glorious Revolution*.

The principles upon which our *civil conſtitution* is built, and the happy conſequences of our deliverance from the ſuperſtition and tyranny of the church of Rome, have ſo often been inſiſted upon, in the courſe of theſe lectures, and repreſented with ſuch ſtrength and propriety, that it might well be accounted preſumption in me to reſume the argument.

I ſhall therefore confine my obſervations to another particular, which, ſo far as I can learn, has not been inſiſted upon by any of my brethren who went before me, *viz.*

THE ECCLESIASTIC CONSTITUTION IN THAT PART OF THE UNITED KINGDOM WHERE WE LIVE.

In explaining which, I hope to ſhew,

That it is well calculated for promoting the great ends of religion, and ſtrengthening thoſe principles

principles of civil government by which our liberties are ſecured:

A ſubject which ſeems to be rendered neceſſary, not only by the reflections which enemies of different kinds have frequently thrown out againſt the principles of Preſbyterians; but alſo from the little attention that is paid by many of the profeſſed friends of that way to ſupport that conſtitution in its purity and vigour, and to enable its miniſters, with reputation and credit, to purſue the ends thereof.

Let it not, however, be imagined, that I am to enter into any of thoſe controverſies which, either formerly, or of late, have unhappily divided Proteſtants, on the ſubject of church-government, and which have ſo often been the occaſion of much angry and unchriſtian debate, while each party, by ſcrewing their own pretenſions too high, in effect anathematized all of a different opinion.

Nor will I, in order to defend our own particular form, pretend to affirm, that our church has attained an abſolutely perfect conſtitution; or that, in practice, we always act up to the perfection ſhe hath attained: on the contrary, impartiality will oblige me to confeſs, that, in both reſpects, we may need amendment; and that our reformation, in ſome inſtances, has not been carried to that height

which our firſt reformers ſeem evidently to have deſigned; but which, from the ſituation of civil affairs, the oppoſition of avowed enemies, and the ſelfiſh diſpoſition of pretended friends, they were not able to effectuate in their own time, nor have their ſucceſſors been able ſince.

As to thoſe particulars in which the fault is owing to miniſters not acting up to the true ſpirit and plan upon which our church is formed, I ſhall not deſcend to particulars; ſince, by pointing out what, according to our conſtitution, ought to be our temper and conduct, every man will be able to judge wherein he fails, and thereby become his own reprover: and ſo that diſagreeable office will not be aſſumed by one who muſt, ere this diſcourſe is finiſhed, owe ſo much to the humanity and candor of his brethren, on account of thoſe miſtakes into which he probably may fall, from the difficulty and extent of his ſubject.

When I ſpeak of our church, you will eaſily perceive, that I mean that *eccleſiaſtic conſtitution*, which in Scotland received the ſanction of civil authority at the *Revolution*, and which, through a long courſe of years, and much oppoſition, had been riſing to that ſtate which ſhe then attained.

As we judge of the excellency of any particular

ticular form of civil government, from its tendency to promote and ſecure the temporal happineſs of the people who live under it;

So we muſt judge of the excellency of any *eccleſiaſtic conſtitution*, from its tendency to promote the ſpiritual and eternal welfare of thoſe who ſhall embrace it. Whatever church-conſtitution has this tendency, may claim a divine warrant and authority: And whatever has not, will in vain pretend to the ſanction of a *jus divinum*, although, by the torture of criticiſm, ſome particular texts of ſcripture ſhould ſeem to give countenance to it.

Every true church muſt indeed be built *on the foundation of the apoſtles and prophets, Jeſus Chriſt himſelf being the chief corner-ſtone*; *i. e.* it muſt hold and adhere to thoſe great and important doctrines which diſtinguiſh Chriſtianity from all the other religions which ever were in the world, and obſerve thoſe methods of worſhip preſcribed in ſcripture; for *there is not another name under heaven given among men, by which we can be ſaved, but the name of Chriſt.*

And as true religion can never be deſtructive of the happineſs of mankind, ſo a church founded on Chriſtian principles muſt always be friendly to civil liberty, which ſtands connected with it by the ſtricteſt ties.

To determine whether this be the character

of

of the church of Scotland, it will be neceſſary to conſider, *Her riſe*,—*Her eſtabliſhment*,—and *the influence of her form on the manners of the people*.

It was the happineſs of Scotland, very early, perhaps as early as the apoſtolic age, to receive the light of the glorious goſpel: and although, as was the caſe with the reſt of the Chriſtian world, this light came to be greatly obſcured, by the ambitious incroachments of the church of Rome; yet it is evident, that in Scotland it was never entirely extinguiſhed. For, in ſome of the remoter parts of our country,— in ſome of thoſe very iſlands which we are now apt to conſider as the ſeats of ignorance and barbarity, lived a people, remarkable for ſimplicity of manners, purity of behaviour, and unaffected piety towards God. Theſe never ſubmitted to the uſurpations of the Papal tyranny; and theſe were *the little leaven which afterwards leavened the whole lump*. Of their number, a *Columbus* and a *Kentigern* were famous in the fifth century, — and a *Clemens* and *Sampſon*, in the ſeventh.

And even in the tenth age, when the darkneſs of corruption and error had greatly increaſed, we are told, there were ſome godly men in Scotland, who taught the true doctrine of Chriſt's atonement, and continued to exerciſe

ciſe their functions apart by themſelves, without acknowledging the authority of thoſe who aſſumed a ſpiritual power over God's heritage. But it was not till about 400 years after this, that any thing of a general reformation began to appear. Then *indeed waters broke forth in our wilderneſs, and ſtreams in our deſert.* Nor was all the cruelty of bigotted zeal able to deſtroy this heavenly plant; but, watered by the blood of a *Reſby*, a *Hamilton*, and a *Wiſhart*, it grew ſtronger and ſtronger, till thouſands flocked to its refreſhing ſhade, and took ſhelter under its branches.

To ſupport and animate theſe, and carry on the glorious work ſo happily begun, providence raiſed up a man of apoſtolic piety and reſolution, whoſe zeal awakened the attention, and whoſe prudence conducted the zeal of his countrymen, in ſhaking off the Romiſh yoke. Every one will immediately perceive, that I ſpeak of the famous *John Knox*, that great inſtrument of our reformation, whoſe name will be precious to lateſt ages.

The civil diſſenſions which then prevailed in the country, did not a little befriend the reformation. And the bold attempt of the Popiſh clergy to get the whole power into their own hands, on the death of James V. opened the eyes of many who till then had remained

inſenſible;

inſenſible; while the hope of enriching themſelves with the revenues of the church, made others ready to join in aboliſhing Popery. And thus, from different principles, a barrier was formed in defence of the reformation, which all the fraud and cruelty of the Queen-Regent, or the addreſs and deſtructive charms of her unfortunate daughter, were never able to overturn. Nay, thoſe very meaſures which they took for cruſhing the Proteſtant intereſt, by the tender mercies of our God, proved the means of eſtabliſhing it, and haſtened the overthrow of the Papal power in this country. So that, in the 1560, the eſſential doctrines of genuine Chriſtanity were publicly acknowledged by the ſtates of the kingdom, and the corruptions of the church of Rome condemned *.

Hitherto the ſtruggle principally had been about the doctrines of religion, as of the firſt and greateſt importance; but theſe being now in ſome meaſure ſecured, our reformers turned their attention to the government of the

* This ſum of doctrine, or confeſſion of faith, was drawn up by the promoters of the reformation, at the command of the parliament; in whoſe preſence it was read; and, after due conſideration, was ratified by them the 17th of July 1560. And on the 24th of Auguſt, two acts were paſſed; one againſt the maſs, and the other aboliſhing the Pope's uſurped authority in Scotland.

church,

church, which, under the Papacy, had become a ſyſtem of worldly power and intereſt, and, inſtead of promoting religion, tended to excite and ſtrengthen ſome of the worſt paſſions in the human mind.

A plan for the worſhip and government of the church was accordingly drawn up, not merely in conformity to the church at Geneva, as one of our modern hiſtorians has aſſerted; but ſuch a plan as to our pious anceſtors appeared moſt agreeable to the mind of God in ſcripture, and the practice of the primitive church.

It is true, this plan was widely different from that of the church of Rome. In it there was nothing to gratify ambition, or avarice; but an amiable, a grand ſimplicity runs through the whole; ſuch as ſuited the worſhip of the humble Jeſus, and the nature of that kingdom which is not of this world.

But although our reformers thus freely gave up with all in the Romiſh church which could pleaſe a ſenſual mind, it was no part of their opinion, that the worſhip of God ſhould be mean and grovelling, — or the miniſters of religion be rendered incapable of diſcharging the duties of their functions, by poverty, or depend upon the changeable humours of people for their ſubſiſtence. Though they gave up

with all views of living in affluence upon the revenues of the church, and did not look upon theſe as the property of the clergy; yet did they eſteem them a fund ſacred to religious purpoſes, to be employed in ſupporting the clergy with decency, maintaining the poor, and educating the youth of the nation *.

So that Knox, and the other leading inſtruments of the reformation, were very far from encouraging that dilapidation of church-revenues which afterwards took place. Nor were they the perſons, whatever has been alledged, who were for demoliſhing the very fabricks of the churches, and all that was decent and cleanly in the places of public worſhip. No: the firſt was often done in direct oppoſition to their warmeſt remonſtrances, by the lower claſs of people, who had long groaned under the oppreſſive tyranny of the monks and Popiſh clergy; while thoſe of higher rank, who

* Theſe are the words of the firſt book of diſcipline. "Of "neceſſity we judge, that every ſeveral kirk have one ſchool-"maſter appointed, ſuch a one at leaſt as is able to inſtruct "the youth in the principles of religion, and teach grammar "and the Latin tongue, where the place is of any reputa-"tion; and that beſides, in every notable town, there be a "college, in which at leaſt the arts of logic and rhetoric, "together with the tongues, be read by ſufficient maſters, "for whom honeſt ſtipends muſt be appointed. And, laſtly, "care ſhould be taken of the ſupport of the great ſchools or "univerſities."

had

had the revenues of the church in their hand, could ſcarce be prevailed upon to employ them in a way which would prevent the other.

But although this form of worſhip and government was embraced by the friends of the reformation in Scotland, and practiſed by them, ſo far as their ſituation would allow; yet it was not till the year 1592, that it received the ſanction of civil authority, and became the national order. And even when the Preſbyterian church ſeemed thus eſtabliſhed, her tranquillity was but of ſhort duration: for there remained in the country a ſtrong party, who, either retaining a ſecret regard to Popery, or thinking it prudent to recede as little as poſſible from the old practice, were for adopting that form of church-government which had been eſtabliſhed in England. The people of this perſuaſion continued with great keenneſs to oppoſe Preſbytery: and though they could not, for ſome time, procure an abſolute repeal of the laws in its favour; yet, by repeated innovations, they gradually deſtroyed their effect, till at laſt, they got a kind of mixed Epiſcopacy ſubſtituted in its place, which continued to be the form of the church in this country till the breaking out of the civil wars.

The true Preſbyterians, ſtill very numerous in Scotland, having now appeared with their

uſual zeal in ſupport of civil liberty, were well intitled to the countenance of the parliament; whereas the friends of the hierarchy, both in Scotland and England, had rendered themſelves and their opinions obnoxious, by ſupporting the crown in thoſe arbitrary and unconſtitutional meaſures which firſt inflamed the nation. This occaſioned the calling together that aſſembly of divines, which, about the 1648, met at Weſtminſter: An aſſembly which, whether we conſider the number, learning, or piety, of the perſons who compoſed it, may well be compared with the ancient councils. This venerable body, after a long and candid examination, agreed to the ſcheme of doctrines, and the form of worſhip and government, contained in their confeſſion of faith and directory, which is, in ſubſtance, the ſame with what had been eſtabliſhed in the beginning of the reformation. This confeſſion and directory was ſoon after received by the church of Scotland; which had now recovered ſomething of its former power, and continued, if not to flouriſh, at leaſt to exiſt, till the Reſtoration; when the King, forgetting all the promiſes made during his afflictions, and the ſervices done him by the Scots Preſbyterians, aboliſhed their government, and permitted a moſt cruel perſecution to be carried

ried on againſt them; becauſe they would not abjure all their known principles, conform to the Epiſcopal government, and acknowledge him head of the church. This perſecution in Scotland continued during the whole reign of Charles II. and King James his brother, whoſe open attachment to Popery, and purſuit of arbitrary meaſures, at laſt awakened the zeal of the nation, and produced that ever-memorable revolution in the 1688, which, as Voltaire elegantly expreſſes it, may well be called the *Æra of Britiſh liberty*. The happy conſequences of this change the Preſbyterians in Scotland immediately felt, not only in reſpect of civil property, but alſo in the full eſtabliſhment of that worſhip and government in the church, to which they had diſcovered a moſt ſteady attachment during a cruel perſecution of eight and twenty years *.

And now that I have traced the progreſs of our church to the period of her full eſta-

* The ſufferings endured by the Preſbyterians in Scotland, during the reigns of the two brothers, were ſo various and ſhocking, that, were they not proved by the records of the parliament and privy council, they would ſcarce now be credited. The facts cannot be controverted; and the ground of theſe ſufferings was no rebellion againſt the civil government, but pure principle of conſcience, in men who were deſirous of living peaceably, only aſking the liberty of worſhipping their God in the way their own minds could approve.

bliſhment,

bliſhment, let us ſtop,—and from this height view the venerable fabrick, and obſerve in what juſt proportion every part of it riſes upon the attentive eye.

Her doctrine, how pure and uncorrupted! claiming a higher origin than the ſyſtems of a Calvin or a Luther, even the authority of the word of God. For no church has maintained, with greater ſteadineſs, theſe two great reformation-principles, the right of private judgment, and ſcripture being the ſupreme judge of controverſy. Nor does ſhe act contrary to theſe, in admitting human ſtandards and teſts of conformity.

That which firſt gave birth to creeds and confeſſions, was the calumnies of thoſe who oppoſed the truth. Thus, when the firſt Chriſtians were pointed out as men of the moſt abandoned character, and Chriſtianity itſelf as an enemy to all order and government,—it became a matter of undiſputable duty to wipe off theſe reproaches, by giving to the world an impartial account of their doctrines and practice; which gave riſe to the ancient creeds and apologies.

At the reformation, the Papiſts acted juſt as the Heathen had done; the ſame irreconcileable enmity to the truth inſpiring both with rage and falſehood; which made not only

only particular perſons, but the reformed churches, in their reſpective bodies, give an authentic account of the doctrines they maintained, the ſprings whence the reformation flowed, and the purpoſes it aimed at; to convince the world, that when they diſclaimed the authority of the church of Rome, deſpiſed her cenſures, and ſtood unawed by the thunders of the Vatican, they were not moved by an averſion to diſcipline, a ſpirit of ſedition, nor a love of unreſtrained pleaſures; but by a juſt regard to the honour of God, and the intereſts of true religion.

Theſe purpoſes we find expreſsly declared in almoſt all the confeſſions of the Proteſtant churches abroad; and the ſame reaſons influenced that venerable aſſembly which compoſed our Confeſſion of Faith: A work which will do honour to the compilers ſo long as any taſte for good ſenſe and ſcripture-truths remains: for there all the great and important doctrines of religion are brought together in a ſhort, plain, and connected view; nor does it, on the one hand, enter into the ſubtilties of perverſe diſputation and metaphyſical refinement; nor, on the other, reject the peculiar doctrines of the goſpel, out of compliment to thoſe who are too wiſe to ſubmit

to

to a revelation from God, and will *lean to nothing but their own underſtanding*.

I am well aware how different this account of our Confeſſion is from the repreſentation which hath been given of it by its open enemies, or from what the ſignificant ſhrugs and inſinuations of ſome who have not yet choſen openly to attack it, would make us believe.

Have not the principles therein maintained, concerning faith, juſtification, and grace, been repreſented as weakening the authority of the divine law, and leading people into the opinion, that holineſs of life is of no great importance? But had thoſe who bring this heavy charge, been poſſeſſed of half that candor and freedom of thought which they pretend to glory in, whatever their own ſentiments as to theſe doctrines were, they would have acknowledged, that the view given of them in our Confeſſion ſeemed to have ſome foundation in ſcripture; and had been the general opinion of all the Proteſtant churches for ſome time after the reformation; and that particularly, in Britain, the time when theſe doctrines were moſt generally received, were ſo far from being remarkable for diſſoluteneſs of manners, that they are ſtill diſtinguiſhed in our annals as the age of religion and ſobriety; whereas profaneneſs and debauchery certainly

mark

mark that period when theſe doctrines firſt became the general ſubject of cenſure and ridicule. At any rate, it muſt be acknowledged, that our Confeſſion is ſo far from countenancing ſuch an abuſe of the doctrines of grace, that it aſſerts, in the ſtrongeſt terms, the perpetual obligation of the moral law, the abſolute neceſſity of holineſs, in order to ſalvation, and the inefficacy of that faith which doth not purify the heart.

The ſame obſervations may be applied to what has been objected on the head of election, the ſovereignty of grace, and the operation of the Spirit. But as time does not allow me to inſiſt upon theſe, let me only notice, as it directly falls in with the ſervice of this day,

That, from our Confeſſion, it may be ſeen how unjuſtly the Preſbyterians have been charged as holding principles inconſiſtent with civil order and government. For there our church gives the nobleſt, the moſt awful original to the magiſtrate's power, the authority of God himſelf. It repreſents this inſtitution as deſigned to promote the moſt glorious ends, the good of the ſociety; and ſo connects the authority of him that commands with the happineſs of thoſe who obey; which is a firmer, as well as a nobler

foundation, than the doctrine of thoſe who diveſt government of every ſweet and amiable character, while, at the ſame time, they arm it with a power which renders it formidable and hateful. In a word, our Confeſſion allows every thing to a monarch that is conſiſtent with the honour and ſupremacy of that God by whom he reigns, that can confer true honour upon himſelf, or enable him to anſwer the important ends of his inſtitution; and ſhows, that the principles of Preſbytery are inconſiſtent with nothing but the domination of an arbitrary tyrant, and the inglorious paſſive obedience of a ſlave.

There is only one thing further to be noticed ere I leave this view of the doctrine of our church; and truly it is ſo trifling, that it would merit no regard, did not our adverſaries, with a great deal of confidence, boaſt of it; namely, the flat contradiction which they alledge there is betwixt our conduct ſince the revolution and the doctrine maintained in the 23d chapter of our Confeſſion of Faith, at § 4. where it is ſaid, "Infide-
"lity or difference in religion doth not make
"void the magiſtrate's juſt and legal autho-
"rity, nor free the people from their obe-
"dience to him."

This we readily confeſs to be our princi-

ciple;

ciple; nor could we maintain the contrary, without impeaching our Lord and his apoſtles for that ſubmiſſion and obedience which they paid to the Roman emperors. But this can never, in the ſmalleſt degree, be inconſiſtent with our having diſclaimed all allegiance to the *abdicated*, or, in the ſtyle of our acts of parliament, to the *forfeited* King James VII.; and ſince his death, to him who pretends to the Britiſh crown; unleſs it can be proved, that we acknowledge him ſtill to have a *juſt* and *legal title*, which, only becauſe of his difference in religion, we make void. This were indeed to contradict the above article in our Confeſſion; but the very contrary is the caſe with us. We do not refuſe him allegiance becauſe he is a Papiſt; but we refuſe him allegiance, becauſe he hath now no *right* and *title* to allegiance: for as the general voice of the people, in their ſupreme court, ſet him aſide, he is no longer a magiſtrate, and his kingſhip is merely imaginary.

But though we do not refuſe our allegiance to that family becauſe they are Papiſts; yet we readily confeſs, that their having embraced that idolatry, and appearing to be ſo deeply impreſſed with the cruel and impious maxims of that falſe and bloody religion, gives us a higher reliſh of the infinite goodneſs of a

merciful God, in calling to the throne of theſe kingdoms the illuſtrious houſe of Hanover, the princes of which have long diſtinguiſhed themſelves as the patrons of liberty and the Proteſtant religion.

But from viewing the doctrine of our church, we muſt now proceed to take a ſhort ſurvey of her *worſhip*.

This a late writer has been pleaſed to pronounce "fanatical extravagance.——A mode "of worſhip the moſt naked and ſimple ima- "ginable, in which not only rites and orna- "ments, but even order itſelf is diſdainfully "rejected as an uſeleſs burden. A mode of "worſhip which, upon its eſtabliſhment, "was obſerved to make the moſt enormous "ravages in the breaſt, and to ſubvert every "rational principle of conduct and beha- "viour *."

Was this a true repreſentation of the caſe, it would be no eaſy matter to vindicate the ſenſe and ſobriety of a people who ſhould diſcover any regard to ſuch a form: and melancholy, beyond expreſſion, muſt their ſtate have been, had this abſurd, this pernicious mode of worſhip taken place amongſt them for any conſiderable time.—— But ſeventy years have paſſed ſince this very mode of wor-

* Hume's hiſtory of G. Britain, vol. 1. p. 62.

ſhip

ſhip was fully eſtabliſhed in Scotland; and ſince that time, it hath been practiſed without interruption there; and yet our greateſt enemies, even this author himſelf, will ſcarce affirm, that all that is valuable and virtuous has been entirely deſtroyed by it; on the contrary, ſince that period, Scotland has flouriſhed more than ever.

So that the argument from experience will be ſo far from making againſt our worſhip, that, with impartial men, it muſt lead to a very contrary concluſion.

And as fact affords no argument againſt our worſhip, neither will any be found to ariſe from a careful examination of its nature and tendency.

It is true, that with us, people are deprived of ſome artificial helps to devotion, which may be found amongſt thoſe of another perſuaſion: The eye is not entertained with painting and ſculpture,—nor the ear regaled with muſical inſtruments of different kinds; — every particular motion of the body, and every ſyllable that dares be uttered within the ſacred walls, are not aſcertained by a poſitive law; —the place of worſhip is not made holy by ſprinkling,—nor the ſign of the croſs thought to convey a particular virtue.

But though ſtript of theſe adventitious helps,

the ſubſtance of every ordinance is carefully preſerved amongſt us, and clothed with ſuch neceſſary external circumſtances, as at once impreſſes the mind with the idea of a holy grandeur and ſimplicity; agreeable to the divine directory, *That as God is a ſpirit, he ſhould be worſhipped in ſpirit and in truth.*

I neither ſpeak now of the fabrick of our churches, nor of the manner in which ſervice may ſometimes be performed there: the one is truly ſhameful; the other may, perhaps, in particular inſtances, be faulty. But with neither the one nor the other can our conſtitution be charged; for although it condemns ſuperſtitious pomp and ceremony, yet it freely adopts the apoſtolic precept, *That all things be done in decency and order*; as I am perſuaded will appear to every man who impartially reads the book of common order, drawn up at the beginning of the reformation, and the directory for public worſhip compoſed by the aſſembly of divines at Weſtminſter; which give ſuch directions, and preſcribe ſuch forms, as, if followed out in practice, could not fail to make us perceive the commanding power and attractive beauty of genuine New Teſtament worſhip.

Let us only figure to ourſelves, a number of Chriſtians, animated by the religious exerciſes of

of the family and cloſet, repairing, on the morning of the Lord's day, to a place decently fitted up for public worſhip, and which the ſervices regularly performed there leads them to account ſacred; — entering, not with hurry, tumult, and irreverence, but with ſpirits at once compoſed, and elevated with a deep impreſſion of the variety and extent of the divine favours: — Let us view them riſing to a ſolemn act of praiſe, and expreſſing the warm devotion of their grateful hearts, in ſome Old Teſtament pſalm, or New Teſtament hymn, and in this heavenly exerciſe employing all the harmony and compaſs of the human voice, more grand and ſweet than any inſtrument: — Figure them anon, with eyes and hands lifted up to heaven, in all the humility and earneſtneſs of prayer, confeſſing their ſins, and aſking grace of him, who giveth to all liberally, and upbraideth not: — Prepared by ſuch exerciſes, with what meekneſs and attention do they hear the ſcriptures read, and the important doctrines and duties of religion explained, while each eye is fixed upon the ſpeaker, and all, as new-born babes, appear deſirous of the ſincere milk of the word, that they may grow thereby; — concluding their worſhip, as it was begun, with a fervent act of prayer and praiſe.

Let

Let Prejudice herſelf now ſay, if the worſhip of the ſanctuary, thus performed, be not in truth a reaſonable ſervice.

But this is the very order and form of the worſhip preſcribed by our conſtitution for the Chriſtian Sabbath.

The ſame happy correſpondence with the the nature, and tendency to promote the ends of religion, will be found in our offices for baptiſm, the holy ſupper, and viſitation of the ſick *. But to any particular diſplay of theſe I muſt not now proceed; the time putting me in mind, that it is proper to end this diſcourſe by a ſhort ſurvey of *the government of our church, and an examination of its tendency.*

With regard to this, we readily diſclaim the ſecular power of the church of Rome, and their uſurped dominion over the conſciences of men. — Our conſtitution neither permits

* By the laws of the church of Scotland, the ſacrament of the Lord's ſupper ſhould be diſpenſed in every pariſh four times in the year. — And though this is ſeldom practiſed; yet, by its being diſpenſed in different pariſhes on different days, thoſe who incline have an opportunity of communicating frequently, without any great trouble. —— The people are prepared for that holy ordinance, by a faſt on ſome day of the preceding week, and ſermon on the Saturday, and meet again on the Monday morning for public thankſgiving. —— And ſo far are theſe meetings from being ſcenes of riot and debauchery, as they have been lately repreſented, — that ſcarce one ſingle inſtance of diſorder has ever fallen under my obſervation.

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the clergy to incroach upon the rights of civil government, with reſpect to others; nor to imagine, that their relation to the church can ſcreen them in violating the laws of the ſtate.—It indeed aſſerts the power of the church to make ſuch regulations as are neceſſary for promoting the intereſts of religion, and maintaining order and decency amongſt her members,—provided theſe regulations are not inconſiſtent with thoſe eſſential and immutable laws laid down in the word of God, and to which the obedience of every Chriſtian is certainly due in the firſt inſtance.

Some, by ſcrewing the authority of the church too high, have plainly laid a foundation for eccleſiaſtic tyranny; — while others, falling as much below the truth, have eſpouſed opinions which have an evident tendency to anarchy and confuſion. Our conſtitution ſeems happily removed from both theſe extremes. —— By it a power is acknowledged, but a power limited to its proper object. — A ſubordination takes place; but the higher you aſcend, the determination lies in the greater number; ſo that if the cenſure, when inflicted, falls with additional weight, yet hereby the greater ſecurity is given, that it ſhall not be inflicted unjuſtly.

What real advantage can a congregational

church pretend to, which might not be obtained by a ſeſſion properly conſtituted and conducted? By this little ſociety, choſen from the congregation itſelf, the manners of the people in every pariſh would be inſpected, and the diſcipline of the church exerciſed: — Here intreaty, admonition, and reproof, would have their ſphere of action and influence, and all the offices of mutual love might properly be exerciſed. In order to this, indeed, it would be neceſſary, that all the members of that body were conſpicuous in their regards to the intereſts of religion and holineſs. But whatever be the caſe in practice, this I may certainly be allowed in my argument to ſuppoſe; ſince, by the laws of our church, piety, evidenced by a ſtrict purity of manners, is required in every one that is veſted with the office of an elder; without which, neither riches, nor influence of any kind, ſhould advance a man to that dignity.

But as all that is any how valuable in the congregational form, might be obtained by means of a ſeſſion; — ſo our preſbyteries, ſynods, and aſſemblies, conſtitute, in their different orders, a hierarchy upon the moſt proper footing, where the power is not lodged in a ſingle hand, but in many, and ſo leſs liable to abuſe. —— And it ought not to be forgot,

got, with what wonderful ſelf-denial, and generous regard to the public weal, the clergy, by the conſtitution of the church of Scotland, have, in all theſe courts, admitted a very large proportion of the laity to an equal judgment with themſelves *. Nor can any of theſe courts, not even the ſupreme, proceed in an arbitrary manner; but are obliged to act by the eſtabliſhed rules of the ſociety.—To which no new law can be added, till it has been propoſed in one general aſſembly, and by them tranſmitted to every preſbytery for their conſent; which, if obtained, at leaſt the conſent of the majority, the aſſembly next year may paſs it into an act, which henceforth muſt be regarded as a conſtitutional law.—A form of

* If this diſcourſe ſhould fall into the hands of any that are not acquainted with the conſtitution of theſe eccleſiaſtic courts in Scotland, they will pleaſe be informed,——That the ſeſſion conſiſts of the miniſter in every pariſh, and a few of the beſt and wiſeſt of the people, who are publicly choſen to the office of elders.——The preſbytery conſiſts of, perhaps, twenty miniſters, and an elder from every pariſh, who determine in appeals from ſeſſions, and regulate all other matters within their bounds.——Their conduct is ſubject to the review of the ſynod, which conſiſts of the miniſters and elders of three or more preſbyteries.——And the general aſſembly is made up of a delegation of miniſters and elders from every preſbytery, and a repreſentative from every borough.——So that here all the orders in the kingdom are repreſented.——And the King is preſent by his commiſſioner; who cannot, however, in the ſmalleſt degree, interfere with the buſineſs of the houſe.

procedure, than which nothing can breathe a nobler ſpirit both of order and liberty. So that every miniſter may know the laws which he is bound to obey.——If he openly violate any of theſe, and perſiſt obſtinately in the violation, he cannot certainly complain, ſhould he be deprived of the advantages of a ſociety which thus he himſelf diſclaims.——But the caſe would be very different, ſhould any church-court, by an irregular exertion of power, inflict a cenſure upon one who acted agreeably to the conſtitutional laws which had been eſtabliſhed. Their power, indeed, he might not be able to reſiſt; but while he felt the diſtreſſing effects of it, his mind might be eaſy, and his conſcience would not accuſe him.

It is true, that the power of our general aſſemblies has often been miſrepreſented, as raiſing the eccleſiaſtic above the civil authority. But ſuch a charge can certainly come from none but thoſe who are either ignorant of our conſtitution, or enemies to it.

Our general aſſemblies are not like the convocations in England; but are, in effect, eccleſiaſtical parliaments, where our laity as well as clergy are fairly repreſented by deputies from all parts of the nation. The lay members are generally men of the beſt quality, and of the greateſt eſteem in their ſeveral countries,

well

well acquainted with our laws, and zealous for our civil liberties; which make them a kind of balance both upon the court and the clergy.

This ſome former princes knew ſo well, that they no ſooner began to form deſigns againſt the liberty of the nation, than our aſſemblies fell under their diſpleaſure; and attempts were made either entirely to aboliſh them, or at leaſt curtail their power.—And this was none of the leaſt reaſons why thoſe princes ſtruggled ſo hard to introduce Epiſcopacy into Scotland, that it had been found by experience, in this country, a ſucceſsful engine of making the parliament of the ſtate, in which the clergy had a ſeat, ſubſervient to the deſigns of the court; whereas preſbytery, being an ariſtocratical government, has a natural tendency to preſerve and ſupport the liberty of the nation. Nor was there ever any deſign formed againſt the one, which was not at the ſame time levelled againſt the other; as might eaſily be ſhewn from our hiſtory.

It has, indeed, been an ordinary objection againſt our church, That ſhe claims a power and juriſdiction independent upon the civil government.—But the objection has its ſole foundation in a miſtake; two things being confounded, which, in their nature, are entirely

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tirely diſtinct, *viz.* the church's power as a church,—and her power as a national church embraced by the ſtate, and veſted with certain civil privileges.

In this latter ſenſe, it is evident, that what power ſhe has, ſhe has by the authority of the laws of the ſtate; for, from theſe alone, can ſhe pretend to oblige the ſubjects of the nation to obedience.

But the intrinſic power ſhe pleads for, is, as our Saviour ſaid of his own kingdom, not of this world; but only that the church, as a Chriſtian ſociety, has a power, independent of the ſtate, to perform all that belongs to a church by the authority which ſhe derives from Chriſt her head. And this power no government on earth can give, or take from her. The people ſubject to this power are not nations, as nations; but nations, or leſſer ſocieties, who, profeſſing the Chriſtian religion, do willingly ſubmit themſelves to the rules of the goſpel.—And when any nation is ſo happy as to ſubmit to theſe rules, the whole nation becomes a church, and by their repreſentatives in a general or national aſſembly, act in an eccleſiaſtical capacity.—And if they act according to thoſe rules which the civil magiſtrates have power to make, they may well eſtabliſh, but can never overturn the government

vernment of the ſtate, which is as much an ordinance of God as the government of the church.

Let me only obſerve farther, upon this head, that the abſolute power the church has over her own members, and the facility with which ſhe can puniſh them if they do amiſs, muſt add not a little to her ſtrength and ſecurity *.

In fine: What care is taken by our conſtitution to preſerve uniformity, and prevent corruption in the church, by thoſe various trials to which candidates for the miniſtry are ſubjected, and the explicit declaration they are obliged to make, of their agreement with the church, in point of doctrine, and ſubmiſſion to her government and diſcipline? And this I the rather mention, as the conduct of our church, in requiring thoſe teſts and declarations, has not only been repreſented as inconſiſtent with the liberty we enjoy in civil matters, but alſo as an infringement on the liberty of conſcience, and the right of private judgment, thoſe leading principles of the reformation.

* It is well known in England, with what difficulty an irregular clergyman can be puniſhed, even when thoſe of the higheſt order are inclined to do it. But in Scotland, if a miniſter miſbehave, the form of procedure againſt him is plain, and not very expenſive.

I cannot now, in the end of a diſcourſe, pretend to enter into a particular vindication of ſubſcriptions. It muſt ſuffice to have obſerved,

That as freedom is the birthright of mankind, any number of perſons may voluntarily unite themſelves, for ſuch purpoſes, and under ſuch regulations, as appear uſeful and convenient to them, provided they do not incroach on the rules of juſtice, and the rights of others. And if they may unite for other purpoſes, much more may they unite for the purpoſes of religion, and the ſervice of their common Lord and Maſter.

But as every man muſt judge for himſelf, and act agreeably to his own conſcience in the choice of his religion,—ſo every religious ſociety has a natural privilege of worſhipping in that way, which, according to their moſt impartial view of things, ſeems moſt agreeable to divine revelation; and of ordering, as they judge beſt, all matters of joint concern to the whole body. Nor has any man a right to thruſt himſelf into their ſociety, but upon their terms, and with their conſent; ſince this would be an uſurpation on the rights of a body entirely independent of him.

And if it ſhould happen, that different ſenſes are put upon ſcripture, in order to ſupport

port oppoſite opinions, they have the ſame natural right of declaring in what ſenſe ſcripture is underſtood by them, and of refuſing to admit into their ſociety ſuch as are of a different opinion. Not that, by ſuch a refuſal, they declare ſuch a perſon a bad man; but only, that, being of a different opinion from them, he can, with no conſiſtency, be one of their ſociety, nor intitled to its privileges.

Such a ſociety of fallible men are, no doubt, liable to miſtakes. They may either believe what is really a falſehood, or fancy a true doctrine of more importance than it is. But this does not alter the caſe in the leaſt. For as it is with a private perſon, ſo it is with ſuch a ſociety: If it errs, it errs only to itſelf, and muſt follow its own light. And it were extremely abſurd to imagine, that, ſo long as conſcience dictates to them the truth and importance of any doctrine, they ſhould be obliged to quit their own judgment, for the opinion of others as fallible as themſelves.

Upon ſuch plain and obvious principles may the church of Scotland be juſtified, in the meaſures ſhe hath taken with regard to her Confeſſion and Formula. And did time permit, from the ſame principles I might ſhow,

with what a bad grace the oppoſers of ſubſcriptions and confeſſions pretend to be the patrons of liberty,—while their very opinion tends to promote incroachments on the right and judgment of others.

Such now, my Brethren, is the genuine character and ſpirit of our eccleſiaſtic conſtitution; friendly to religion,—friendly to liberty. And ſuch too, I apprehend, their conduct in the main will appear, who have adopted that ſyſtem.

What a glorious ſtruggle for both was made by our anceſtors, in the beginning of our reformation! What a noble ſtand did they make for true liberty, during the confuſions of the civil wars! Were not the Preſbyterians too the people who moſt ſteadily oppoſed the repeated incroachments on our civil rights during the reign of the two brothers; and, at laſt, by their conſtancy in ſufferings, rouſed the attention of a ſlumbering nation? And the ſpirited behaviour of the members of the church of Scotland, in the 1711, 1715, and 1745, muſt ſhow they were animated by the ſame principles.

Since, then, my Brethren, this is the genius of our conſtitution;—ſince the conduct

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of Preſbyterians in former times has been ſo agreeable thereto; let it be our conſtant care to purſue the ſame conduct:—As paſtors, with prudence, care, and tenderneſs, feeding the flock of Chriſt:—As honeſt men, not aſhamed to own the doctrines we have ſubſcribed, nor to act up to the characters we bear:—And as Britons, ſhowing an unſhaken attachment to the intereſts of civil and religious liberty.

Which may God continue as a bleſſing to theſe iſlands to lateſt poſterity. *Amen* and *Amen*.

F I N I S.

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